

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Context

Teen sexuality is a major social concern for several reasons. First, a high number of teenage women become pregnant every year. In Wisconsin in 1997, 163 births were to teens under 15 and 2,541 were to mothers 15 to 17 years old (Bureau of Health Information, 1999a). This represents a fertility rate of 33 births per 1,000 females under the age of 17. The fertility rates among this age group have decreased annually since 1991 (Bureau of Health Information, 1999a). Early pregnancy can significantly affect the education and future opportunities of these young mothers. In addition, children of adolescent mothers are more likely to suffer from premature birth, low birth weight, physical abuse and neglect, and poor performance in school (Department of Health and Family Services, 1998).

Every year, about 3 million U.S. teenagers are infected with a sexually transmitted disease (STD) and teens account for one quarter of the 12 million STD cases estimated annually. Roughly 25 percent of sexually active adolescents become infected with an STD each year (Allan Gutmacher Institute, 1994). In Wisconsin in 1996 there were over 3500 cases of chlamydia, nearly 1,500 cases of gonorrhea, and nearly 250 cases of herpes reported by people under 20 years old (Kowalewski, 1997). High school age youth¹ have the highest STD infection rate of any age group in Wisconsin. However, there is reason for optimism. A recent report from the CDC finds that infection rates for chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis significantly declined among this age group since 1990 (Division of STD Prevention, 1997). In 1996 there was also a decrease in the number of reported cases of HIV infection (14) and AIDS cases (3) among adolescents 13 to 19 years old (Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program, 1997).

A recent Wisconsin survey found that most parents think premarital sex among teens is always or nearly always wrong (Bogenschneider, et al., 1996). Over three-quarters of parents also worry about their children being pressured into having sex but think that it is unlikely that their child is sexually active.

Highlights

- Forty-four percent of students reported that it is important to them to delay having sexual intercourse until they are married, engaged or are an adult in a long-term, committed relationship.
- Those who expressed a commitment to abstinence expressed more responsible behaviors on nearly every measure.
- Six in ten students reported never having had sexual intercourse.
- Wisconsin students were less likely to report having had sexual intercourse before the age of 13 than the national average.
- The percentage of students who reported having ever had sexual intercourse significantly decreased between 1993 and 1999 from 47 to 42 percent. However, among those who are sexually active, the percentage who reported sexual intercourse in the past three months increased from 69 to 74 percent from 1993 to 1999.
- Six out of ten sexually active students reported using a condom the last time they had sex. Condom use decreases as grade increases.

¹ Defined as ages 15 through 19.

- Students in Wisconsin are less likely to have talked with their parents or other adults in their family about AIDS or HIV infection than the national average. The proportion of students who have talked with an adult family member about HIV and AIDS has decreased since 1993.

General Prevalence Rates

The vast majority of students reported that they received instruction at some time about AIDS and HIV infection in school (91 percent). Slightly over half reported talking with their parents or other adults in their family about AIDS and HIV infection. Interestingly, 70 percent of Wisconsin parents claimed to have talked to their child about HIV and AIDS (Bogenschneider, et al., 1996).

Students were asked if it is important to them to delay having sexual intercourse until marriage, engagement and other specific times. Twenty-two percent said that it was important to delay having sexual intercourse until marriage, 19 percent said until they are adults in a long-term committed relationship and three percent said until they are engaged. An additional twenty-three percent said that it was important to delay having sexual intercourse until they are in love. Four percent said it was important to delay having sexual intercourse until finishing high school. Twenty-nine percent said that it was not important to delay having sexual intercourse.

Four in ten students reported that they have had sexual intercourse. Over half of those who reported having sexual intercourse said that they became sexually active when they were 15 or 16 years old (see Figure 1). Of those who reported ever having had sex, nearly two-thirds (or 29 percent of all students) said that they had had sex with only one or two people. One quarter of students who had had sex (or 10 percent of all students) reported having sex with four or more people (see Figure 2). Nearly three quarters of students who reported ever having sexual intercourse (or nearly 31 percent of all students) reported having sexual intercourse in the past three months (see Figure 3).

Figure 1. Age of First Sexual Intercourse

Percentage of all students by the age at which they first had sexual intercourse.

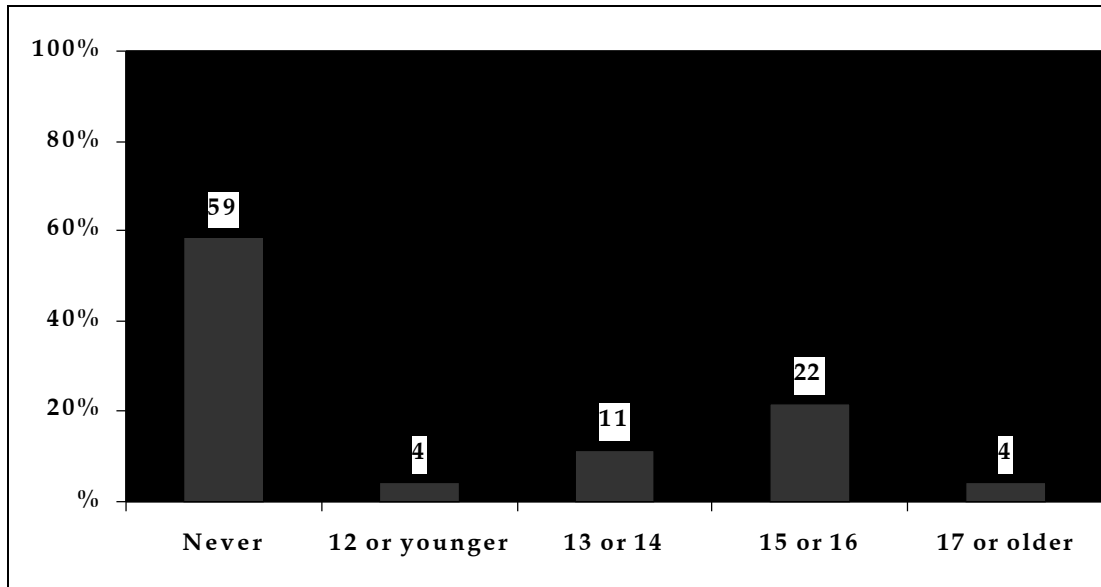


Figure 2. Number of Sexual Partners

Percentage of students by the number of sexual partners they had in their lifetime for those who had ever had sex.

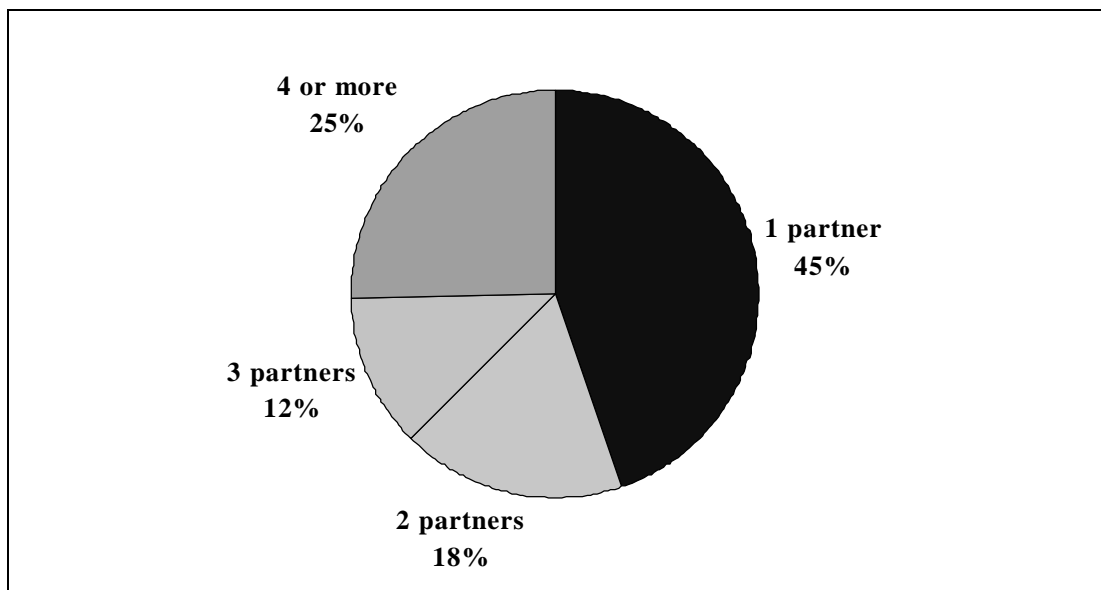
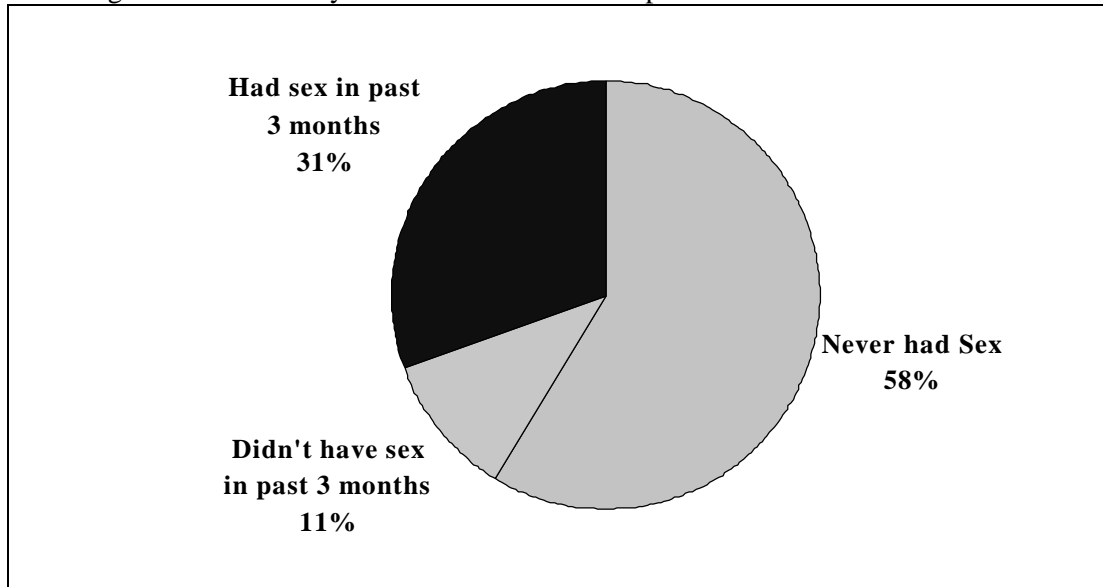


Figure 3. Sexual Intercourse

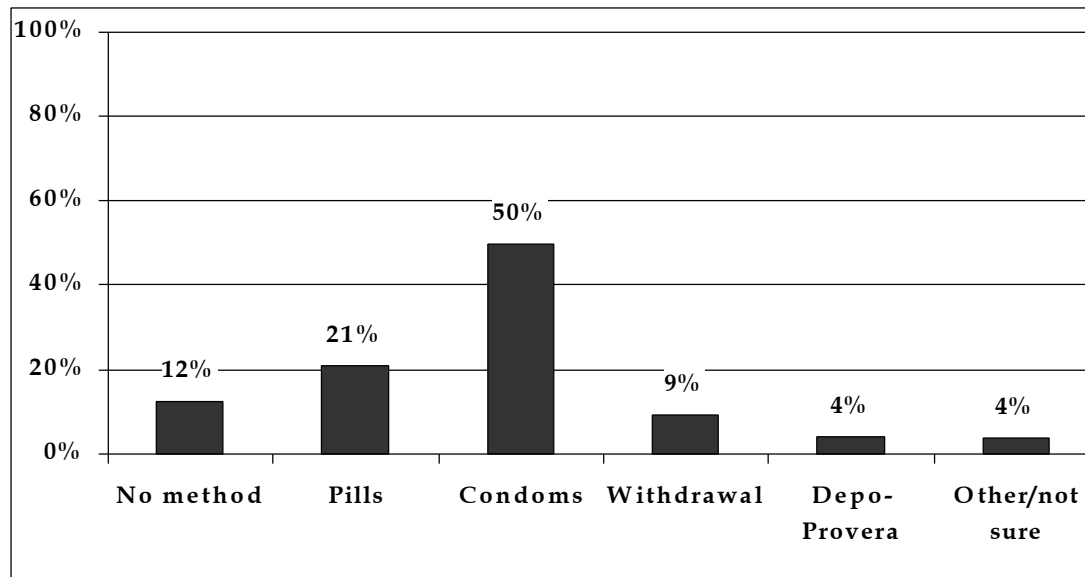
Percentage of all students by sexual intercourse in the past three months and lifetime.



Nearly a quarter of the students who reported ever having sexual intercourse said that they drank alcohol or used drugs before the last time they had sex. Six out of ten sexually active students reported that they used a condom the last time they had sex. Seven out of ten sexually active students reported using either condoms or birth control pills to prevent pregnancy the last time they had sexual intercourse² (see Figure 4). A quarter of sexually active students reported using no method, withdrawal or weren't sure what method was used to prevent pregnancy the last time they had sex. Six percent of all students reported having been pregnant or having gotten someone pregnant. When the analysis is limited to sexually active students, the prevalence rate rises to 16 percent.

Figure 4. Birth Control Method

Percentage of all students by the method of birth control used during their last sexual intercourse for those who had ever had sex.



When 1997 National YRBS results and 1999 Wisconsin YRBS results are compared, three significant differences emerge. First, students in Wisconsin are less likely to report having ever talked about AIDS or HIV infection with their parents or other adults in their family than the national average (54 percent compared to 63 percent). Second, students in Wisconsin were less likely to report having had sexual intercourse for the first time before the age of 13 than the national average (4 percent compared to 7 percent). Finally, students in Wisconsin were less likely than the national average to report having had sexual intercourse with four or more people during their life (10 percent compared to 16 percent).

² Two separate questions were asked about birth control. The first asked only about whether a condom was used at the time of their last sexual intercourse. The second asked about a wider variety of birth control methods focusing on the method used for pregnancy prevention. The difference between those who reported using a condom in the first question (60%) and those who reported using a condom in the second question (50%) is likely due to those students who used multiple birth control methods and who considered condoms secondary to other methods for pregnancy prevention.

Trends

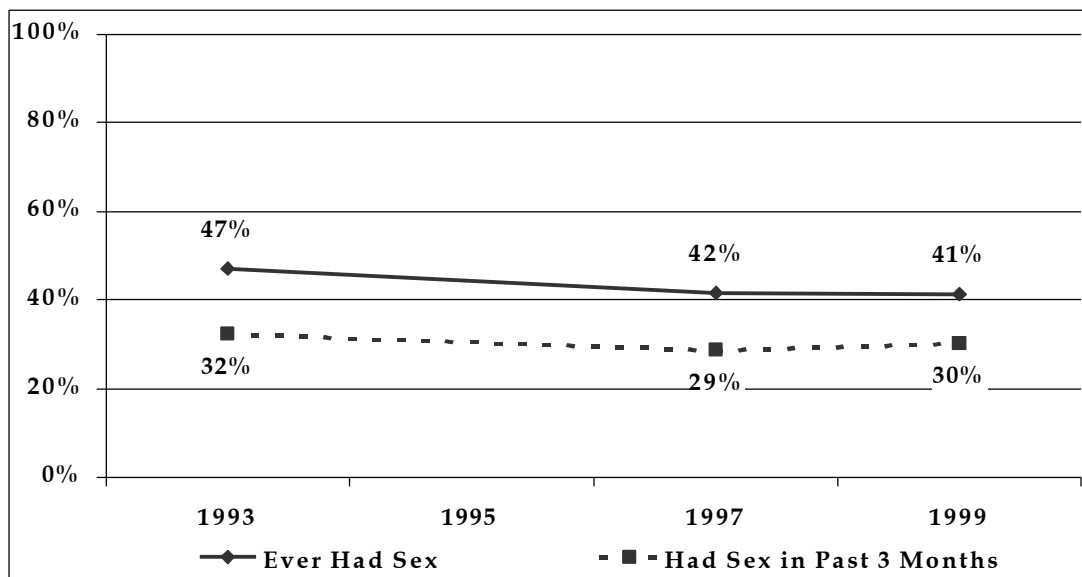
There was an increase in the percentage of students who reported ever having been taught about HIV and AIDS in school (84 to 91 percent) and a small decrease in the percentage who said they had talked about HIV and AIDS with an adult family member (58 to 54 percent) between 1993 and 1999.

The percentage of students who reported having ever had sexual intercourse significantly decreased from 47 percent in 1993 to 42 percent in 1997 and 41 percent in 1999 (see Figure 5). However, the number of sexually active students who report having had sex in the past three months increased from 69 percent in 1993 to 74 percent in 1999. The average number of partners that students report during the past three months decreased from an average of 1.6 in 1993 to 1.4 in 1999. Of those who reported having sexual intercourse, there appears to be evidence that sexually active students are waiting longer to have sex. Twenty-nine percent of students in 1993 had their first sexual intercourse when they were 16 or older compared to 37 percent of those in 1999. There also appears to be a significant trend toward fewer partners. Fifty-six percent of sexually active students report one or two partners in 1993 but this percentage increases to 63 percent in 1999.

There was no significant difference in the number of sexually active students who reported using a condom during their last sexual intercourse. However, those who reported using birth control pills increased slightly (19 percent in 1993 compared to 21 percent in 1999). In addition, those who reported using no method declined slightly each year (15 percent in 1993 compared to 13 percent in 1999). Roughly, the same percentage of students reported using alcohol or drugs before their last sexual experience in 1993, 1997 and 1999. There was also no significant difference among those who reported having been or having gotten someone pregnant across the years surveyed.

Figure 5. Change in Sexual Behavior: 1993-1999.

Percent of all students who reported having ever had sexual intercourse and who had sex in the past three months.



Comparisons by Demographic Groups

Gender

Nearly equal percentages of male and female students reported learning about HIV or AIDS in school, but a significantly higher percentage of female than male students reported talking with an adult family member about it.

There was no significant difference between the percentage of male and female students who reported ever having had sexual intercourse. However, male students who had ever had sex reported having had sexual intercourse for the first time at younger ages slightly more often than female students did. However, the most common age for having sex for the first time is 15 or 16, accounting for roughly half of both males and females. The number of partners reported by students who had ever had sex is nearly identical for male and female students. Nearly half of male and female students who had ever had sex said that they had only had one partner. Twenty-three percent of female students and 26 percent of male students had had four or more sexual partners in their lives. Over three quarters of male students who had ever had sex (or 32 percent of all male students) reported having sex in the past three months. This was true of 71 percent of female students who had ever had sex (or 29 percent of all female students). This difference did not achieve statistical significance.

Nearly three in ten male students who had ever had sex said that they drank alcohol or used drugs before the last time they had sexual intercourse. This compares with only two in ten female students who had ever had sex. This difference is marginally significant. Sixty-eight percent of male students who had ever had sex and 51 percent of female students who had ever had sex reported using a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse. A significantly higher percentage of male students (76%) who had ever had sex reported using either condoms or birth control pills to prevent pregnancy the last time they had sex than similar female students (65%). Similarly, female students were more likely than male students to report using no method of birth control, withdrawal or not being sure what method was used the last time they had sexual intercourse. Female students were slightly more likely to say that they had gotten pregnant than male students were to report that they had gotten someone pregnant.

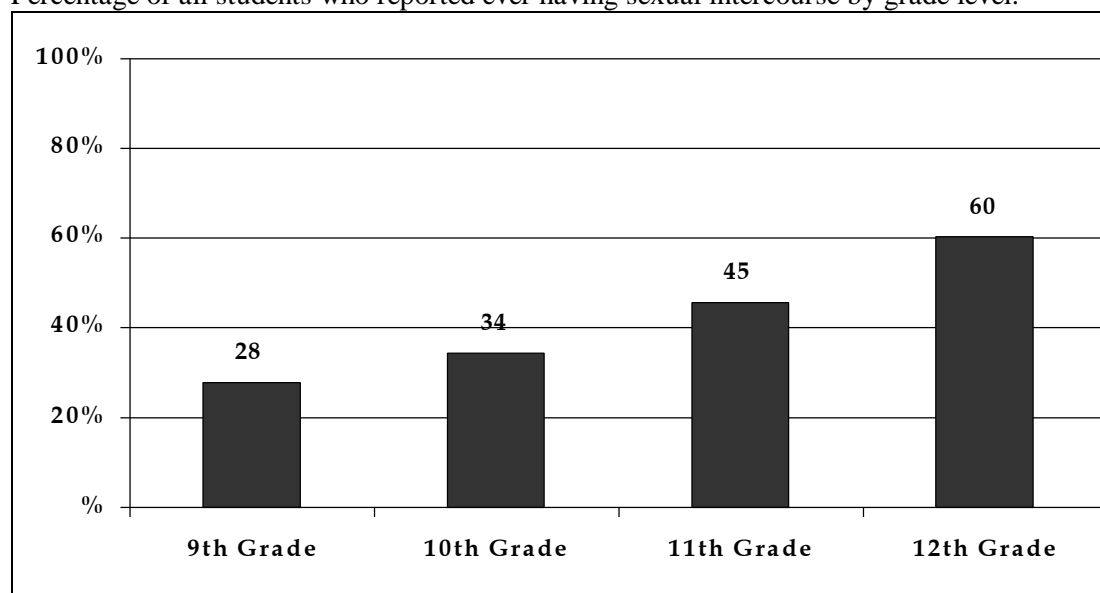
Grade

The percentage of students who were ever taught about HIV and AIDS in school and the percentage who have talked with an adult family member about the issue did not vary significantly across grade levels.

As might be expected, the percentage of students who reported ever having had sexual intercourse and those who reported having had sex in the past three months increased significantly with grade level. Twenty-eight percent of ninth graders reported ever having had sex compared to 60 percent of seniors (see Figure 6). Similarly, the percentage reporting having had sex in the past three months increases from under one-fifth of ninth graders to nearly half of students in the twelfth grade. There was, however, no significant increase in the number of sexual partners students reported having across the grade levels.

Figure 6. Sexual Intercourse by Grade Level

Percentage of all students who reported ever having sexual intercourse by grade level.



There are indications that students become more sexually responsible as they pass through higher grades. However, it should be noted that even ninth graders show some responsibility for their sexual activity. Condom use decreases with grade. Among sexually active students, two-thirds of ninth grade students report using a condom during the last time they had sexual intercourse compared to half of seniors. However, when other pregnancy prevention methods are considered, this trend is somewhat reversed. Among sexually active teens, 62 percent of ninth grade students report using either birth control pills or condoms the last time they had sexual intercourse compared to 70 percent of seniors³. Similarly, the percentage that reported using no method, withdrawal or who weren't sure what method they used to prevent pregnancy decreased from one-third of ninth graders who had ever had sex to about one-fifth of students in twelfth grade who had ever had sex⁴. The majority of students in each grade reported using condoms during their last sexual experience. The chances that students who had ever had sex drank alcohol or used drugs before their last sexual experience showed no significant change across grade levels. The percentage of students who reported either having been pregnant or having gotten someone pregnant is relatively stable for ninth, tenth and eleventh grade students but significantly increases for seniors. If the analysis focuses only on students who had ever had sex, there is a statistically significant decrease in the prevalence of pregnancy from ninth to eleventh grade and then a sharp increase among seniors.

³ Eleventh grade students reported the highest rates of pregnancy prevention methods use (77%).

⁴ Eleventh grade students reported the lowest rates of using no method, withdrawal or not being sure what method was used (17%).

Commitment to Abstinence

Those who indicated that it was important to them to delay having sexual intercourse until marriage, engagement or until they are an adult in a long-term committed relationship were compared with students who did not express such a commitment. On nearly every measure, these students expressed more responsible behaviors. Students who expressed a commitment to abstinence were one third as likely as others to report having had sexual intercourse (19 percent compared to 60 percent). Of those that had been sexually active, they were less likely to report having had sex before the age of 14⁵. These students were also much less likely to say that they had more than two sexual partners in their lifetime (15 percent compared to 43 percent). They were half as likely to say that they had used alcohol or other drugs before they had sexual intercourse the last time (14 percent compared to 26 percent). However, there was no significant difference between the two groups in sexual activity in the prior three month, either condom use or other birth control use, or in the percent who said that they had been or had gotten someone pregnant.

⁵ This difference was marginally significant.